

Wednesday, July 25, 2001

Duxbury Clipper

## Journey Down Surplus Street ✱

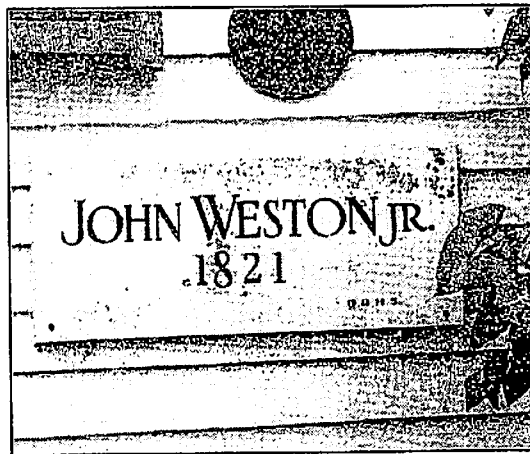


Photo by Gabby Katz

### The Other Westons

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

As we make our way down Surplus Street, we come to two beautiful Capes. One faces the road. The John Weston House, while the John Jr. House sits further back off this ancient cart way. It is impossible to speak of one house history without discussion of the other parcel and homestead - their stories are so entwined, beginning with a land grant received in 1696. This

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## Journey Down Surplus Street - Part IX

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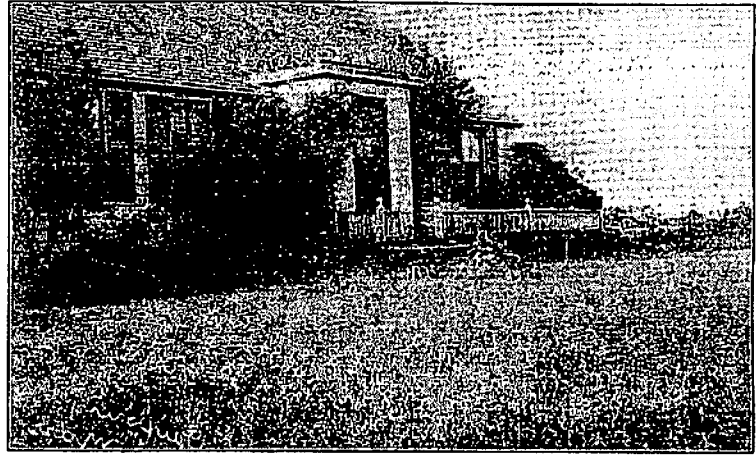
Weston family's livelihoods, like their relatives on Powder Point, depended on the sea, which brought them both prosperity and tragedy. The John Weston House, the oldest house on our tour, will also take us back to the days of the American Revolution. A pathway can be more than just a road to the shipyard and shore. It can lead to tales of bravery and patriotism, which once told remain as an example of our forefathers' struggles for success and freedom.

### The John Weston House 204 Surplus Street

In 1696, John Weston was granted a parcel of land on Surplus Street. At the time, he was living at the Nook on the western side of Captain's Hill where he made his living as a shipwright. There are no records of when and who built this lovely house which originally was a half-Cape. We do

know, however, that John Weston sold his Nook property in 1731 after his first wife Deborah Delano passed away. Around the same time, his eldest son Abner had married Sarah Standish, the great granddaughter of Captain Myles Standish. "It seems certain that John and Abner went from the Nook to the grant (on Surplus) since there is no record of either of them owning any other house in Duxbury, or elsewhere, after leaving the Nook," noted Dorothy Wentworth, the former town historian.

It is believed John Weston built the house at 204 Surplus Street in 1729, in anticipation of his eldest son's wedding to Sarah. Only two years later, however, John also moved into the Cape on Surplus Street, along with his second wife Rebecca and a four-year-old son, David. John Weston was 68 years old when he left the Nook to retire to Surplus Street. His son Abner, married in 1730, was already living in the house



This old photo taken of the John Weston House shows the openness of the property.

*courtesy of Jane and Harry Ekblom*

with wife Sarah Standish Weston and a new baby son, Micah. Three generations of Westons now resided in the half Cape.

John Weston had learned his trade in shipbuilding at the Thomas Prince shipyard by Eagles Nest Creek. This shipyard is believed to be town's first shipyard, with Duxbury's shipbuilding enterprises beginning in 1719 when Thomas Prince built his first vessel made of wild cherry wood. After Weston moved to Surplus Street he turned his talents toward another Duxbury industry- weaving.

There were other weavers in the Surplus Street area at the time. "In the Weechertown area, along South Station Street, there were at least two men who were weavers, known to have employed one or more in their shop," noted Wentworth. Weaving, like shoemaking, originated as a home business by the wives of

the household. As the industry grew, some weavers built long buildings near their homestead for their looms. John Weston may have worked for one of these shops.

Unfortunately, John did not live long in the Cape house on Surplus Street. He died in his sleep in 1736 with the recorded cause of death being 'nightmares,' which he is said to have experienced regularly. There was no transfer of title through deed or will from John Weston to his son Abner who was still living in the house with his wife, infant son, step-mother and half brother. It was common practice for a son to take over the operation of the family farm, and thus obtain possession of the property without deed, will or objection from other family members. This was the case for the John Weston House.

In addition to farming his property, Abner was most likely a shipwright. By 1744, he had to support a large family now



The John Weston House built in 1731 is the oldest house on our

that his wife had given birth to five children, and his step-mother and half-brother were still living in the Cape house.

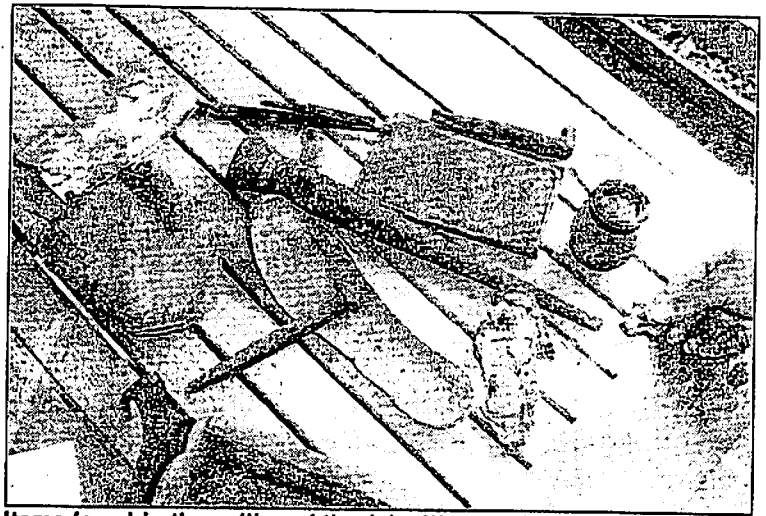
The property benefited not only from Abner's hard work, but also from the woman he had married- Sarah Standish Weston. As the great-granddaughter of Myles Standish, her family's prosperity proved an asset for Abner and Sarah. Her father provided a substantial dowry of furniture and live stock, and she would later inherit a substantial sum of money, 20 pounds, from her father. "A considerable amount at that time when many bequests were for shillings," said Wentworth.

In April of 1759, Abner's two sons, Seth and Micah, joined Captain John Wadsworth's Company which went to Canada and joined the English forces to fight the French. Fortunately, both sons returned from the war, and soon married- Micah to Bethia Oldham and Seth to Desire Jenny.

Micah, like most Duxbury boys, was lured to the sea and worked as a mariner when he returned from Canada. "Tradition, love of adventure, desire to see the world, and the social prestige of the shipmaster's calling were partly responsible for Yankee boys going to sea," noted Samuel Eliot Morison in his book, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts 1783 - 1860*. The other advantage to this type of work was high wages. By 1799, one seafaring company, for example, paid boys \$8 to \$10 a month, seamen \$14 to \$17 per month, and petty officers up to \$24 month. Reportedly, by 1812 American seamen

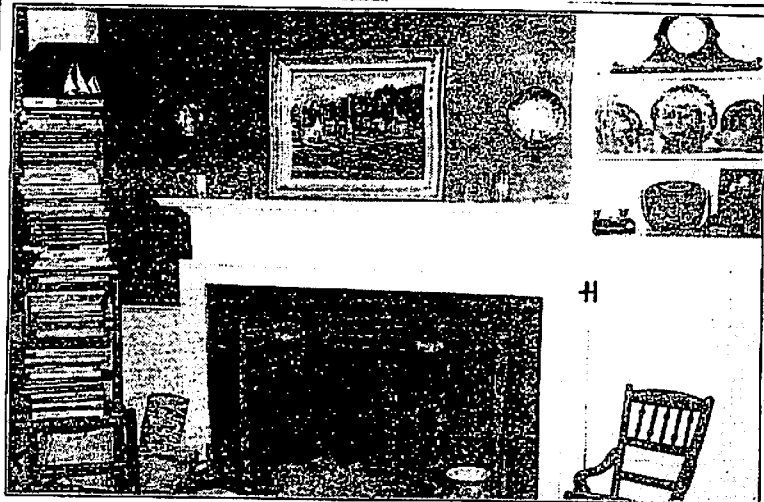
made an average of \$22.50 per month. This was a substantial amount of money considering food and shelter was also provided during the long stays at sea. A common laborer in New England, on the other hand, earned about eighty cents a day in 1810, which had to also pay for housing and food expenses. It appears Micah was able to provide well for his family, and maintain the Weston homestead from his mariner wages.

Good wages came with a price, however, for seafaring young men. "Many of them



Items found in the ceiling of the John Weston House during renovations

photo by Debora Katz



This front room of the John Weston House was later added, converting the house from a half-house to a full Cape.

Photo by Debora Katz

never returned from their dangerous calling," noted Morison. This would be true for two Weston family members. Micah's brother, Seth, who was killed by lightning while at sea, and Micah's son John -lost at sea around 1798.

Micah's mother, Sarah Standish Weston, passed away in 1779. Following her death, Abner deeded his property over "to his son and grandson, in an unusual double transfer that may have been in consideration of James' age, 24, and his forth-

coming marriage" to Sarah Sampson, said Wentworth. The transfer is unique in that it gave Micah 2/3s interest in the "whole of his farm" including the house and outbuildings, and James, Abner's grandson, 1/3 interest, which represented land only.

Although away at sea for long stretches, Micah still managed to have seven children with his wife, Bethia, all of whom were raised in this Cape Cod. His eldest son James enlisted in both the army and navy during the later part of the Revolutionary War.

"He served aboard the schooners that ran the British blockade in an effort to have some trade with coast ports and also to keep in touch with the other towns," noted Wentworth.

James Weston, along with three other Duxbury men—Consider Glass, Thomas Chandler, and Asa Tour—served as the crew for Samuel Chandler's schooner, the *Polly Johnson*, under the command of Captain John Winsor. It was captured by a British ship, the *Perseverance*. The British crew took the schooner out for a cruise to determine its sailing abilities. Fortunately for James Weston and his companions, the enemy returned the next day releasing them back on the *Polly Johnson*.

These Duxbury men were very lucky considering the outcome of an earlier British capture of a Duxbury schooner belonging to Elijah Sampson, which was set on fire off the beach shore. This schooner's crew met a different fate as they were placed on a prison ship in New Jersey where all but two Duxbury men died. For the Weston family, James' capture by the British must have been an exciting bedtime story for his children and grandchildren to listen to around the large sleeping room hearth.

By the end of 1785, James had married Sarah Sampson and had his first child, Sally. Tragedy occurred in 1787 when the couple's twins died only a few days after birth. Another loss would follow, as their daughter Sally died at the age of ten, two years after the birth of their son James Jr. The couple then had Otis born in 1797, who grew up with his brother James Jr. and lived a long and fruitful life in the Cape house on Surplus Street.

A bedroom in the northwest corner of the John Weston house reveals a later addition, which expanded the half-Cape into a full Cape Cod. At the time, this expansion provided Abner's spinster daughter, Hannah, her own living quarters. There are two cellars, which also indicate the original house was a half-house later converted. The older section of the house has a dirt root cellar, while the extension of the Cape maintains a cellar with a field-stone wall. "Each was entered by a trap door opening in the floor, the usual way until early in the 1800s," noted Wentworth.

The John Weston house has been beautifully restored and maintained over the many years of ownership. The long wood planks and original doors are treasures from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. A door in the original part of the house is from a ship and dates to the 1700s, noted Jane Ekblom, who purchased the house with her husband Harry in 1991.

During renovations of the keeping room's low ceiling, items such as a lady's glove, a tiny teacup, pieces of porcelain, and an inkbottle were discovered. "The former owner's, David and Diantha Patterson, gave us a shoebox filled with the things found in the ceiling and also items they dug up, such as the front section of a man's leather shoe, which are

from the shoemaking business which happened here," said Jane Ekblom. (see photo) Otis Weston, the last Weston to own the property, was a shoemaker by trade.

John Weston built his family a sturdy structure as evidenced by the large beams found throughout the original house. Today, the corner beams are still exposed as a reminder of his workmanship. "When we went to have two sconces installed in the dining room, we found horizontal beams that were 5 by 15 inches thick, and the electrician had to take the shingles off the outside of the house just to get them in. A two day project just for two lights," laughed Ekblom.

What is most remarkable about the house, however, is the fact that five generations of Westons resided here. Mostly mariners and men of the Revolution War who after making the extension from a half Cape to a full, never felt the need to make any other substantial additions, leaving the property virtually unchanged until it finally went out of the Weston family in 1881.

### John Weston, Jr. House 218 Surplus Street

Although this lovely Cape Cod was built around 1821 by John Weston, Jr., its history goes further back to a 1696 land grant, and early deed transactions in the Weston family. In 1794, Micah Weston, son of Abner Weston, sold the family homestead at 204 Surplus Street along with surrounding land to his son John soon after John's marriage to Priscilla Stetson. John had made substantial improvements to the farmhouse prior to his actual ownership. The deed transaction maintained a clause which allowed his father Micah and mother Bethia Weston to remain living in the residence "as long as they live in this world."

A year later, John purchased from his brother James a 10-acre parcel of land abutting the family homestead.

The sea brought both prosperity and tragedy to the Weston family, however. John's plans for the property came to an abrupt end when he was lost at sea in 1798. Except for the ten acres purchased from his brother James, the remaining land and house at 204 Surplus Street reverted back to John's father Micah. The widow Priscilla retained the ten-acre parcel for her infant son to have one day.

A year later, Priscilla married Wait Wadsworth who was also recently widowed and had a sizeable family, including a child the same age as John Weston, Jr. Wait Wadsworth, as we know from Part VI of this series, was a blacksmith who provided well for his family. His trade was growing due to the shipbuilding industry's need for ironworkers. John Weston, Jr. grew up not far from his Weston relatives on Surplus Street. From his stepfather, he learned the blacksmith trade.

It is not until John Jr.'s marriage to Hannah Soule in 1821 that the ten-acre lot comes back into the story. This ten acres would be the place John Jr. would build a large Cape Cod house with a back ell for his new wife Hannah. Their first child, also named Hannah, was born there in 1822.

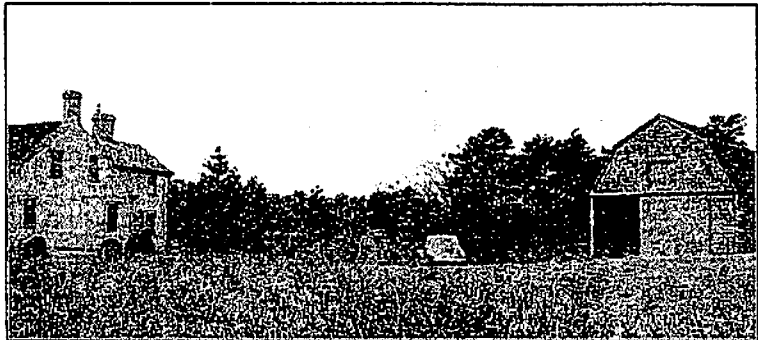
Six more children would be born in the Cape's small borning room off the oversized keeping room. Their second child, a daughter, died at five weeks old. Then came John in 1827, George Loring in 1827, Abba in 1830, Nathaniel Ray in 1831, and Daniel in 1834. Both Nathaniel and Daniel followed in the Weston family's interest in shipbuilding by becoming ship caulkers.

The full Cape Cod, which John Jr. built, had the traditional two windows on either side of the central front door. Unlike the house his father grew up in, however, this Cape's windows did not touch the eaves, which allowed for higher ceilings.

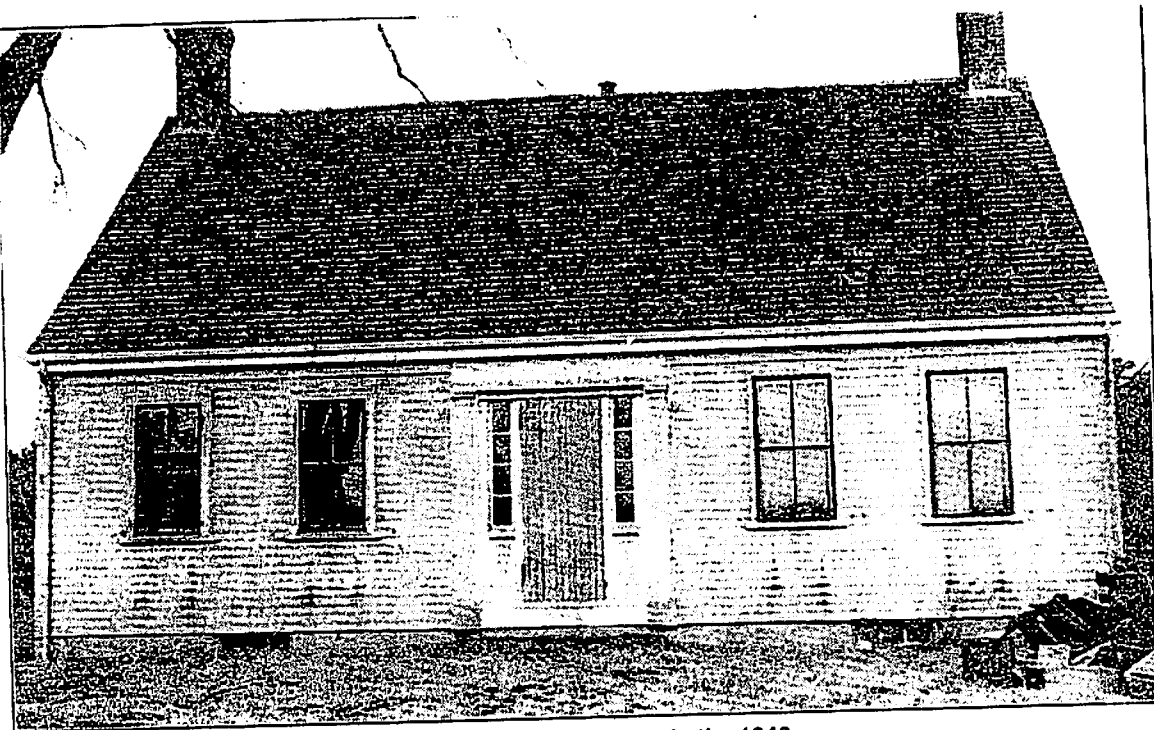
John Jr.'s house also differed from the many Capes found along Surplus Street since it did not maintain a center chimney. An older building added to the rear of the house already boasted a large fireplace for cooking, enabling John Jr. to build his fireplaces on either end of the house- a lovely and more heat efficient feature. The elimination of a center chimney



**The John Weston, Jr. House today and in the 1940s.**



*courtesy of Dr. Allen and Joanne Lahey*



**The John Weston, Jr. House in the 1940s.**

*courtesy of Dr. Allen and Joanne Lahey*

also allowed John Jr. to build his stairway straight up without the pitch found in most Cape Cods, another 'novelty' for the time period.

The ell is particularly interesting since its materials and structure indicate a much older building than the main part of the house. In this ell there is a large hearth with a full wall of beautiful exposed bricks. Built into the right side of the fireplace is another fascinating feature. "Here inside this hole was a copper basin that was used to wash the laundry," noted the current owner Dr. Allen Lahey. With so many children, Hannah Weston must have stood often in front of this copper basin scrubbing the family's clothes in water warmed by the large hearth.



**Copper laundry basin of the John Weston, Jr. House**

A wonderful space in the John Weston Jr. house is the keeping room, now a dining room, which boasts twelve doors all with their original large black hinges and latches. These Christian doors are found on every wall and led to the burning room, buttery, cellar, stairs, two front parlors, storage areas and to the outside.

John Jr. resided only fourteen years in his house on Surplus Street. He, like others in 1835, was lured to East Boston where new and larger shipyards offered bigger pay and better job opportunities. East Boston experienced a sudden rise in population due to shipbuilding, "which in twenty years' time produced the finest sailing ships that the world had ever seen," noted Morison. Unlike Duxbury's bay, which was too shallow for the Clipper ships, East Boston produced many of these large vessels.

John Weston, Jr. received

a substantial price for his Duxbury property, \$1,089, reflecting the condition and size of the house, and the substantial acreage. Another Weston, Gershom Bradford Weston, the son of Ezra Weston II also known as 'King Caesar', purchased John's property. Gershom was John's third cousin. He never resided here on Surplus Street—the purchase was purely for business purposes.

Captain Sylvester, who sailed many of the Weston vessels, later purchased the property, which remained in the Eldridge family until 1875 when it was sold to Seth Weston.

Although Seth was a summer resident, his lineage goes back to the original Duxbury Weston settler, Edmund, the father of John Weston who received the land grant in 1696. Seth Weston was a successful builder and contractor, who often referred to the summer residence as his "resort home."

It remained in this family until 1923 when the Weston ownership in the property ended. What is most amazing about this Cape Cod is the fact the house was not winterized until the late 1940s—it remained virtually untouched for almost 125 years. "There were no plumbing, electricity or heat systems in the house until then," noted Dr. Lahey, who purchased the house with his wife, Joanne, in 1976.

An old photo taken in the 1940s shows the privy (outhouse) standing in the distance. Even with the modern updates, the house still maintains many of its original features - so much so, that John Weston, Jr. would recognize the lovely Cape Cod house he built for his family back in 1821.

*Next week in this series, our journey ends with a visit to a unique historical house along with old photographs taken by William Facey, once a resident of Surplus Street, whose photographic hobby left a pictorial record of one of Duxbury's oldest pathways.*